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ABSTRACT

Much Italian-American culture and writing, beginning with the Italians' migration and settlement in the United States from 1880 to 1920, is forgotten today. Italians traditionally did not value literacy and education. Italian-Americans, for economical reasons that they share with other ethnic and racial minorities as well as cultural characteristics that are probably theirs alone, were not as successful as other groups in developing a literature, especially in the decades before the ethnic revival of the late 1960s. Other reasons include a biased publishing industry, influenced by the personal taste and commercial judgments of editors whose reasons for rejection are Italian-American author's lack of sophisticated style, lack of universal themes, or lack of realistic characters. Since 1990, the number of multicultural composition textbooks and multicultural courses have grown, suggesting a common ground for all cultures, rather than making diversity a barrier among cultures. However, Italian-American writers still do not enjoy the broad audience achieved by other cultural groups. Among the reasons why these writers are not being included in the current emphasis on multiculturalism is the absence of sympathy for their ethnic group, extant for other cultures such as Native Americans or African Americans. However, in the 30 multicultural texts examined recently, 4 of 13 published between 1991 and 1993 were Italian-American selections, but of 17 published in 1994 and 1995, there were 9 selections. This seems to indicate more acceptance of Italian-Americans and their literature as an important piece of the American cultural mosaic. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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Multicultural Texts and the Italian-American Experience

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In October 1939, the Book-of-the-Month Club, in deciding what its selection would be, passed over a novel about Depression-era Okies leaving the Dust Bowl to look for work in California, in favor of another novel about an Italian immigrant family's struggle to survive in New York after the husband and father is buried alive by stone and mortar in a construction accident. The first novel? Of course, it was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, now an American classic. The chosen book? Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*, virtually unheard of today outside of Italian-American literary circles (Talese 25).

Di Donato's experiences illustrate the fate of much Italian-American culture and writing that resulted from the Great Migration from Italy in the half century following that country's unification in the 1860s, a migration that cost Italy a quarter of its population overall, but a very disproportionate amount from the poverty-stricken southern half of the Italian peninsula and Sicily, where ancient villages were entirely depopulated within two generations. Di Donato, born in 1911 in New Jersey, was a grade school drop-out who followed his immigrant father into the bricklaying trade. The accident that served as the basis of Di Donato's novel actually happened in 1923, when the author was twelve years old. His mother's death a couple of years later--having received no financial assistance whatsoever after the father's death--forced the author to drop out of seventh grade in order to support his seven brothers and sisters.

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With the rise of racial and ethnic awareness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, literary and cultural critics began to analyze the position of Italian-American writing in the American literary mainstream. Two questions emerged from this examination. The first was simply, "Why aren't there more Italian-American writers?" to which was added the second, "Why aren't there more Italian-American writers represented in the literary canon?" In addition to reviewing the literature in regards to this dual question, this paper will also suggest some answers to a third question that followed an examination of current multicultural texts: "Given the current emphasis on multiculturalism, why aren't Italian-American writers writing about Italian-America better represented in current multicultural anthologies?"

How many Italian-American writers are there? The first bibliography, collected by Olga Peragallo in 1949, listed only 59 Italian-American writers representing a population of about 5 million first and second generation Italian-Americans (Green 21). Rose Basile Green's bibliography a generation later, in 1974, lists 62 novelists. Looking at two more recent publications, Helen Barolini's 1985 anthology *The Dream Book*, contains work by 56 Italian-American women writers, including memoirs and nonfiction along with fiction, drama, and poetry, while Tamburri, Giordano, and Gardaphé's *From the Margin*, an anthology published in 1991, includes both creative and critical work by about 40 mostly recent-born authors.

Why Not More Italian-American Writers?

Scholars in literature, history, and sociology, as well as writers themselves, have examined the character of Italian-Americans as well as the character of the Great Migration and settlement in the U.S. from 1880-1920. An overwhelming consensus comes from these scholars.

Similar to problems encountered by other ethnic Americans, Italian-Americans first had to acquire the tools for writing. This usually included facility in the English language, although some early Italian-American writers wrote in Italian or even in French. Only a few first generation immigrants acquired enough expertise in their second language to write in it (Barolini; Greene; Talese).

Like other immigrants, however, Italians needed not only a facility in the language but the time in which to write. This was an unheard of commodity among most first and second generation Italian-Americans who had fled but not left behind abject poverty. Economic necessity forced all immigrants, including young children, into lives of endless drudgery in factories, sewers, mines, and streets. Second and even third generation would-be writers fared little better with their families' emphasis on being pragmatic: both sons and daughters were and still are steered into either blue-collar trades or white-collar sure-money professions like medicine, business, and law, rather than "the uncertain and meager financial rewards that too often accompany careers as writers and teachers of literature," as current writer Gay Talese explains from his own

early experience as a journalist (29).

Furthermore, not only was there no time for writing but the privacy it required was also hard to come by. Italian-Americans remain to this day essentially a group-minded group. Talese explains, "The writer's life is a solitary one, and ... solitude is a most unnatural condition for the village-dwelling people that the Italians essentially are" (29).

Furthermore, suspicious attitudes toward literacy and education had also survived the Atlantic crossing. In contrast to the northern half of Italy, Southern Italy especially had been a land dominated by corrupt foreign landowners since the Thirteenth Century, resulting in an culture of fatalism, *destino*, with a *miseria* mentality--that is, utterly inescapable misery from the poverty of one's fate on this earth. This attitude resulted in turn in complete distrust of all authority and institutions outside the extended family and complete loyalty to it. Outside authority included all those connected with the government, church, and schools; by extension, education and the written word were suspect as ways that children could be lured away from total loyalty toward their family and their duties to it. Barolini writes:

> There are certain mindsets . . . endemic among the Italian immigrants, which are taking generations to reshape. Self-denial was the psychological preparation among peasants for survival in regions where *la miseria* was the norm of life and there was no chance of a better one. Therefore, one denied oneself aspirations

> and one's children education because both were futile. When the poor did leave to better themselves in this country, they brought their ways intact, including the old *miseria* mentality. . . .
>
> In America schools were not always regarded as the road to a better future; more often they were seen as a threat to the family because they stressed assimilation into American ways. Reading was ridiculed as too private, too unproductive, too exclusive an enjoyment--free time should be spent with the family group. Learning gave one ideas, made one different; all the family wanted was cohesion. (8)

Two more ideas are useful here. First, many critics comment on the ultimate way of enforcing family loyalty: *omertà*, or the code of silence which causes Italian-Americans to shy away from divulging any family secrets (Talese 23). Barolini writes of this in reference to women writers:

> [T]he cultural tradition of *omertà*--the conspiracy of silence . . . sees nothing, hears nothing, tells nothing, and thus betrays nothing. Writing is an act of assertiveness and Italian American women, with few exceptions, have not been reared for public assertion. (23-24)

Second, this survival mindset can further be described by reference to the concept of *malocchio*, the evil eye. Lawrence DiStasi describes it: "Beauty and excellence attract the eye, and the admiring eye thus attracted, no matter how benign it may

appear, is *mal*, is evil, and capable of causing harm" (Barolini 24). And Barolini writes of how *malocchio* works, especially in reference to female writers:

> [Italian-American women writers] are ... susceptible to the idea that excelling, drawing attention to oneself, is not womanly, not good. . . . One mustn't disconnect from one's immediate group, as a writer must in order to get perspective and unique vision: and, one mustn't try to see too much--either into oneself or into others; all such would bring upon oneself the curse of separation.
>
> It is not unlikely that the subtleties of these attitudes have helped reinforce the reticence of Italian and Italian American women and it is not improbable that residues still remain of the very prevalent *malocchio* fear. The taboo is against being seen as excelling in anything, or in that close seeing which is self-knowledge; for the mysteries must be kept. Those who see too far--Tiresias, Milton, Galileo--go blind. (24)

Finally, part of the distrust of education and literacy can also be seen in the idea that Italian culture is image-based rather than word-based (Paglia 29). This may explain why film is perhaps a "truer, more traditional outlet for artistic Italian-Americans than books," as Talese writes of the views of critic Camille Paglia (29). Talese details the upbringing of the filmmaker Martin Scorsese as described by Anthony DeCurtis:

> The director recalled that during his student days at

> New York University he had shocked his parents one day by walking into their home carrying a book! "There were discussions about whether or not I should bring the book into the house," Mr. Scorsese said. His American-born parents, who worked in the garment center, had failed to complete grammar school. The only reading matter in their home was tabloid newspapers, and Mr. Scorsese said he grew up "cowed a little by the tyranny of art" and particularly "the tyranny of the word over the image." (Talese 29)

Thus, Italian-Americans, for both economic reasons that they share with other ethnic and racial minorities as well as cultural characteristics that are probably theirs alone, were not as successful as other groups in developing a literature, especially in the decades before the ethnic revival of the late 1960s.

Why not published?

The second part of this question needs to be addressed also, however. Why isn't the Italian American writing that did get done get published, kept in print, and made more widely known in the mainstream?

Again, the first reason is probably that shared by many ethnic and racial groups: until recently, most minority literature was simply not welcome due to a biased publishing industry (including book reviewers) as well as a biased reading public. Many minorities were only allowed to have a public life in stereotypical roles of servants, beasts of burden,

entertainers. A public role that showed one's intelligence and perhaps one's criticism of the system just wasn't allowed.

> Italian immigration to this country was preponderantly by people who were not wanted or valued in their land of origin, then found they were not wanted or valued here when they aspired to more than their exploitation as raw labor. (Barolini 3-4)

Fingers are often pointed at the American publishing industry for failing to publish Italian-American writers or, once published, for failing to advertise them and keep writings in print. Talese quotes Fred Gardaphé, Italian-American writer and professor of English at Columbia College in Chicago, whose book *From the Margin* was rejected in the late 1980s by every main commercial publisher he sent it to; he finally had it published by an academic press, Purdue, in 1991. Gardaphé says:

> "The book business is made up of editors and publishers whose backgrounds are mostly Anglo-Saxon and Jewish. . . . The acceptance or rejection of manuscripts is influenced by editors' personal tastes and commercial judgments. . . and with so few Italian-American editors in the mainstream, it's not surprising that there are so few widely circulated books on Italian themes--except, of course, those dealing with gangsters.
>
> There are not only few Italian-American editors, but just as few book columnists and critics. . . .
>
> We Italian-Americans as a whole get little support from the mainstream. (25)

Talese points out that Italian-Americans only get published when they fit into one of three categories: first, they ignore or deride their ethnicity; second, they change or Americanize their names; or third, they write about the Mafia. Barolini points out further (37) that "the Italian American novel, when written by an Italian American author, is all but invisible, while authors of other backgrounds, using that material, have received attention" such as *Household Saints* by Francine Prose, just made into a movie last year.

On the other hand, publishers and critics state several reasons for their lack of interest in Italian-American writing. Talese writes, citing DeCurtis, "Too many Italian-Americans . . . are nonreaders, and thus fail to form a book-buying market that publishers cater to" (25).

A second cause for publishers' disinterest is an alleged poor quality of the material. Italian-American writing has been described as lacking a sophisticated style, lacking universal themes, and lacking realistic or well-developed characters. Tamburri, Giordano, and Gardaphé give Barolini's description of this problem. In writing of two important works, Barolini says:

> Both [works] leave the brute strength of experience. . . . It is as though style and linguistic daring are still being sacrificed to the white heat of telling our story . . . . Only when our history. . . has been transcended will we come into our own stylistically and be open to some greater experimentation of theme and style. (8)

At the same time as the stories are felt to be too real, the characters themselves are often described as being too *unreal*, too allegorical for American audiences, like characters in opera!

Multicultural Texts

Since 1990, the number of multicultural textbooks to be used in composition or multicultural courses, has grown. The point of view and intended audience for each text may vary, but in general they are aimed at introducing the various cultures of the U.S. to the American college student or at least exploring common cultural themes from a variety of American ethnic perspectives. For example, *Celebrating Diversity: A Multicultural Reader*, published by Heath in 1995, states, "The multicultural readings [in this book] . . . reflect--and celebrate--cultural diversity in its broadest sense. A major criterion in selecting these readings was that they have universal application for college composition students--that they suggest a common ground for all cultures, rather than making diversity a barrier between cultures."

One would think that with this trend and this philosophy, the voices of Italian-Americans would finally be given a broader audience alongside other voices previously marginalized from American literature: Native American, African American, Asian American, Caribbean American, Hispanic American, and women from all groups. Sadly this has not been the case.

In my examination of thirty multicultural texts suitable for undergraduate writing courses with copyrights from 1991 to 1995,

only thirteen contained any selections by an Italian-American writer on an Italian-American theme; furthermore, of these thirteen, only three carried more than one selection. In all, out of about 2250 total selections in the texts, only 17 were Italian-American, for a figure well below .1 percent.

Reasons already reviewed why Italian-American writers have found it hard to be or stay published still hold true today in this age of multiculturalism. Italian-Americans still face much bias from the publishing world where they must battle the stereotypical Mafia image that has been created for them. However, they also must battle unrecognized bias from those who assemble these anthologies.

Barolini, writing in 1985 about women writers, gives what I think is still the current attitude toward Italian-American writers as a whole:

> Non-Wasp writers have come to the fore brilliantly--Jewish women writers, Blacks, Native Americans, Chicanas--all have been collected, given critical attention, and, thereby, given presence. The Italian American woman writer belongs nowhere--not minority, not mainstream as Jewish and Black writers now are, she remains silent as a group, without champions or advocates. (31)

One basic reason that I feel Italian-American writers are not being included in the current emphasis on multiculturalism is what I might call the "European argument." That is, Italians, unlike most other currently recognized ethnic and racial groups,

are European. In fact, this is perhaps the major reason why many people might not consider Italian-American literature as deserving of "multicultural" status, especially as moves are made to de-Europeanize the canon. Yet one can view this in the opposite way. To do so, I'd like to mention the ideas from a major Twentieth Century Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, jailed under Mussolini for twenty years.

The notion that is important in the current context is his theory that some capitalist countries in Europe were "peripheral" while other countries had "central" status. The peripheral countries had less developed capitalistic economies and thus were outside the mainstream in Europe. He listed as peripheral Portugal, Spain, the Balkans, Poland--and Italy. Furthermore, Gramsci himself was a Sardinian, in fact from the poorest part of that island, and was acutely aware of being thricely marginalized: from a peripheral area of a peripheral region of a peripheral country in Europe (Adamson 87-89).

Thus, I feel it is wrong to continue to marginalize Italian-American writers; their grandparents had no voice a century ago in Italy and their status as "Europeans" should not be held against them in this country and in this century.

A second argument for keeping Italian-Americans out of the multicultural texts I might call the "assimilation argument." That is, the argument goes that the Great Migration of 1880-1920 is over, and many of the third and fourth generation descendants have intermarried with people from other groups, lost their Italian identity, and found success in mainstream American life.

To this argument I would counter that the Chinese came over well before the Italians and their descendants have often found material success in this country, yet they are well represented in multiculturalism and the names Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston are household words--as they should be. Furthermore, it's debatable how much success and assimilation have come to Italian-Americans. Some sociologists have suggested that at this time the third and fourth generations are in sad shape, falling into two socioeconomic classes (upper middle and working), almost paralleling the situation a century ago in Italy between Northern and Southern Italians (Mangione & Morreale). And Andrew Rolle's magnificent psychological analysis *Italian-Americans: Troubled Roots* speaks volumes to the problems arising from culture clash inherited but not yet solved among the millions of Americans of Italian heritage, which include the usual litany of minority problems: alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, teen pregnancy, mental illness, criminality. Thus, the "assimilation" argument is only partially true.

A third argument I might call the "suffering argument"; that is, some might argue that Italian-Americans did not suffer much compared to African-Americans or Native-Americans. Of course I would have to agree with this. Yet I would also ask that people remember the lynchings that occurred of 15 Italians in the early part of this century in New Orleans; the infamous case of Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s; the fatal attack by the Colorado National Guard on striking coal miners in 1914 in Ludlow, Colorado, in which Italian and Chicano women and children were

shot, burned, or suffocated to death; the deplorable working conditions of men, women, and children in the tenements of New York City; the prejudice they faced from Anglo-America.

In addition to these three arguments, a final reason that Italian-Americans are not well represented in multiculturalism can perhaps be proposed. Given the current view of "appropriate" diverse cultures, Italian-Americans are just not quite in vogue. In other words, I want to suggest that Italian-Americans are seen as not quite politically correct for a number of reasons.

Basically, this outsider status is tied to several aspects of the Italian-American character and persona. Italians and Italian-Americans are very pragmatic people; as pointed out earlier in this paper, this pragmatism is one of the reasons that so few Italian-Americans have had literary aspirations. This pragmatism also manifests itself in a people who are not idealists or extremists; in short, Italian culture is one that accepts violence, fate, death, and the contradictions involved in daily life. These are not qualities popular in American culture, which is characterized by utopian idealism, both on conservative and liberal sides. For example, Italian-Americans have recently produced wildly popular public figures in Madonna and Camille Paglia that both the right and left either objects to strongly or is confused about. This no-man's land of Italo-Americana can be summarized by DeCurtis's characterization of Italian-Americans as "'too unpolished and prole for the right wing' and 'too independent and unfashionable for the left'" (Talese 25).

Italians are also "obsessed with family," in their lives as

well as in their literature. Barolini explains:

> Italian Americans, male and female, in their literature as in their lives, are obsessed with family. It is their theme much more than such "American" ones as Didion's angst, Beattie's bleakness, personal ambition, spiritual struggle, or the hard working out of the clinical sex relationship. (35)

While both the left and the right are reclaiming the family as political territory, neither group does so in the fundamental way that characterizes Italian-Americans. The right is too male-dominated, whereas Italian culture is very much centered on the mother as symbolized by the cult status of the Madonna (Barolini 9). On the other hand, the left is too anti-male dominated. For example, establishment feminism has encouraged women to leave all abusive relationships; in contrast, the Italian attitude is to battle it out within the family, live with some unpleasantness, without destroying the family. Barolini describes this:

> A film of 1970, *Lovers and Other Strangers*, [shows] the father in an Italian American family confront[ing] a son who [is] contemplating divorce: "What do you mean you're not compatible? What do you mean divorce? What are you--better than me? Look at me, do I have to be happy to be married! What makes you think *you* got to be happy? Why do you think we keep families together? --for happiness? Nah! It's for *family*!" (8-9)

Both the left and the right have very different views on religion, including how it is seen as functioning in daily life.

On the one hand, current liberalism espouses an anti- traditional religion attitude, while many Italian-Americans of course profess allegiance to the Catholic Church, in word if not in deed. Even as atheists, Italian-Americans often feel the symbolic value of their traditional religion, which is very image-based. This is in contrast also with the right's emphasis on the text-based literalness of their religious faiths.

Finally, Italian-Americans are not simply out of style because they're considered too middle-of-the-road for either left or right; in fact, they are considered with prejudice by a biased right that considers them violent and overly sexual. By the left they are often considered the enemy, along with other "white ethnics" such as Poles, Greeks, and other eastern and southern Europeans, as holders of racist attitudes against African-Americans and other minority groups. The Slovak-American writer Michael Novak describes this anti-working class, white ethnic bias clearly:

> I am born of PIGS--those Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs, non-English-speaking immigrants, numbered so heavily among the workingmen of this nation. Not particularly liberal, nor radical, born into a history not white Anglo-Saxon and not Jewish. . . , thus privy to neither power nor status nor intellectual voice . . . . In particular, I have regretted and keenly felt the absence of that sympathy for PIGS that the educated find so easy to conjure up for black culture, Chicano culture, Indian culture, and other cultures of the

> poor. In such cases, one finds, the universalist pretensions of liberal culture are suspended: some groups, at least, are entitled to be both different and respected.
>
> There are deep secrets here, no doubt, unvoiced fantasies and scarcely admitted historical resentments. (543, 546)

Novak wrote this in the early 1970s at the time of the rise of ethnic and racial consciousness in the U.S. I think his sentiments still hold true today in trying to explain the absence of Italian-Americans in the recent multicultural trend

In the thirty multicultural books I examined, I did notice a trend toward more Italian-American selections in the books published most recently. For example, in the thirteen texts published between 1991 and 1993, there were only four Italian-American selections. In the seventeen texts published in 1994 and 1995, there were nine selections. I hope this trend indicates more acceptance of the status of Italian-Americans and their literature as an important piece of the American cultural mosaic.

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